



*realists*



*Donald Perlis*

*Born New York; lives in New York.*

*Kenmare Street Sink. 1966.*

OIL ON CANVAS. 50 x 40. LENT BY MR. AND MRS. HOWARD NEIL ANTMAN.

*Monique Maltere. 1969.*

OIL ON CANVAS. 60 x 50. LENT BY THE ARTIST.

*Untitled. 1969.*

OIL ON CANVAS. 60 x 50. LENT BY THE ARTIST.

*Virginia Piersoll. 1968.*

OIL ON CANVAS. 60 x 50. LENT BY THE ARTIST.

*Monique Maltere. 1969.*

OIL ON CANVAS. 60 x 50. LENT BY THE ARTIST.







## 22 *Realists*

*William Bailey*  
*Jack Beal*  
*Robert Bechtle*  
*Harold Bruder*  
*John Clem Clarke*  
*Charles Close*  
*Arthur Elias*  
*Richard Estes*  
*Audrey Flack*  
*Maxwell Hendler*  
*Richard Joseph*  
*Howard Kanovitz*  
*Gabriel Laderman*  
*Alfred Leslie*  
*Richard McLean*  
*Malcolm Morley*  
*Philip Pearlstein*  
*Donald Perlis*  
*Paul Staiger*  
*Sidney Tillim*  
*Paul Wiesenfeld*  
*Donald James Wynn*

Half of the artists in the exhibition which this catalog accompanies are attempting to reinstate in their paintings a pictorial illusionism fully in keeping with the tradition of Western art which remained relatively unbroken from the High Renaissance to the advent of Impressionism in the 19th century. In aligning their art with a continuum which has been broken by the tradition of modernism, each of these artists faces a peculiar set of problems. Perhaps the gravest problem is that of retrieval: the selection of what is best left to the history of art and what can be or must be excavated for contemporary use is of paramount importance. Can, for example, history painting be revived and be used in a contemporary context? Has grand manner portraiture got anything to give today? Is there any validity in the old hierarchy which places genre subjects at the bottom of an imaginary ladder and places history painting at the top? These questions and dozens of others are being asked because the artists have discovered that a piecemeal retrieval of the past is simply not enough to allow a coherent reformulation of illusionist styles.

The intense questioning and consequent rethinking of everything from particular grisaille and glazing formulas to the arranging of models in large figure compositions is necessary if only to allow these painters alternatives to modern pictorial syntax. Many artists, including William Bailey, Arthur Elias, Alfred Leslie, Philip Pearlstein and Sidney Tillim began their respective careers as abstract painters and consequently had manual habits which of necessity had to be radically redirected to serve their present purposes. To achieve a reordering in their art without lapsing into painting procedures which were wholly received from the matrix of modernism, each artist was compelled to return to pre-Impressionist painting methods. (The younger revisionist figurative artists, including Donald Perlis, Paul Wiesenfeld and Donald Wynn, did not go through an abstractionist phase and therefore did not have to rethink early habits.)



The rejection on stylistic grounds experienced while still in school by the younger painters in this exhibition, such as Richard Estes and Donald Perlis, has roots, I believe, in the peculiar pedagogy developed in art schools and university art departments since the Second World War. This peculiar confluence in the "advanced" art departments of colleges, universities and art schools of Bauhaus ideals with Abstract Expressionist studio habits left little room for the art student who wished to develop the particular kind of technical proficiency necessary to paint in full-blown illusionist styles. The art schools which held fast to traditional values in studio courses presented small opportunity since they more often than not featured instructors whose main concerns seemed to be to avoid coming to grips with prevalent modern styles and at the same moment to avoid a full commitment to traditional illusionist styles.

One could ask why these artists felt and feel compelled to return to pre-Impressionist painting for models on which to base, at the very least, their paint handling. I believe a general answer can be advanced which will not explain particular morphological developments but which may help to explain a shared train of thought. Together with Abstract-Expressionist painting there were and still are a large number of artists who painted figures, landscapes and still lifes which seemed to emerge from the freed paint strokes inherent in the Abstract Expressionist style. In one sense these artists *allowed* traditional subject matter to co-exist within the picture as paint in and for itself. The paintings by Richard Diebenkorn from the period 1955 through 1966 come to mind as maintaining the aforementioned co-existence between paint as paint and paint used in the service of defining traditional subjects. Each of the artists in the present exhibition was acutely aware of the evasiveness inherent in this type of painting and each was interested in building a pictorial syntax which could credibly reinforce a commitment to figurative painting. The loose handling was seen as a commitment to an abstracting tendency which meant, quite simply, a divided commitment. A return to early twentieth-century figurative styles meant the same

fracture, perhaps somewhat diminished, but a division nonetheless. Thus the attempt to reinstate subject matter in a fully illusionist way was defeated by a hesitancy to abandon the achievements of abstract art. Virtually the only accommodation for figurative art was to force it into the closet while the rest of the house joyfully accepted the increasingly abstract pictures. If the circumstances did not exactly foster the return on the part of the figurative artists to a full scale revision of earlier illusionist styles, it certainly assured them that accommodation with contemporary abstract styles was not possible. Thus the door was open to the past in a particularly bracing way — there was nowhere else to go.

For the second group of artists in the exhibition the problem of identity within modernism is less personally thorny. For most, the very act of painting is inherently problematic and many, if not all, view painting itself with irony and are thus detached from the same kinds of conscience-provoking questions which engage the revisionist painters. The wholesale use of the colored slide, photograph, postcard, and mass-produced lithographic reproduction is a very real issue which divides the two groups. The more traditionally-minded artists eschew their use, arguing that the intervention of the photograph as a vehicle from which to paint shortstops the perceiving process in a way that disallows the ultimate growth of the artist's vision. The artist-perceiver relies on a second hand visual experience which somehow stops a meaningful encounter with his subject matter, his reality. The criticism is predicated on the hope that the figurative artist — no matter what his persuasion — is intent on seeing or perceiving in the manner of the best painters of the 19th century.



The two groups are divided on the question of subject matter in yet another way. The Post-Pop realists treat subject matter as a history of symptoms (state of being as symptoms?) while the revisionists take a fundamentally moral view of subject matter. The former group in no way attempts to release the cognitive tension implicit in its use of subject matter. The banalities, horror, temptations, etc., of day to day existence are exposed whether they are found in advertisements, architecture, automobiles, storefronts, fashion, etc. . . . In one sense these artists use illusion to explode the illusions inherent in the culture although disavowing the *responsibility* for doing so. On the other hand, in revisionist work the pictorial problems are solved with the use of cognitive tension and with an idealist faith that the problems can be solved. Gabriel Laderman's landscapes and still life paintings are fulfilled and fulfilling from within this position in a richly realized manner. What is conceived about the subject matter in each picture is as important as is what is perceived. In other words Laderman conceives of the picture plane as a surface on which he can articulate problems through the use and treatment of a subject matter which defines his personal world-view. It could be stated that any artist does the very same but, with an important difference, Laderman offers an idealist solution to virtually every problem posed. The sophisticated spatial delineations achieved by Laderman, in which subtle shifts of perspective occur within each volume, are depicted and consummated with restraint, erudition and taste. His understanding of the possibilities of landscape painting as a mode within which the artist may express his subtlest emotional states as well as give expression to a world view is clearly articulated in his writing. He asserts: "Edmund Burke, together with the picturesque theorists, established the philosophical formulation for

landscape painting of the 18th and 19th centuries. In their writings, for the first time in the history of art, different kinds of compositions or arrangements of forms on the surface of the canvas and different kinds of forms in nature were associated with specific emotional states and philosophies."<sup>1</sup> The same article went on to trace the history and philosophy of landscape painting as it was set forth in the late 18th, and continued through the 19th and 20th centuries to the present moment. It is his prescription for dealing with the continuing romantic tradition and is the most articulate manifesto for a rehabilitation not only of contemporary landscape painting but figurative painting in general: "The romantic personality of the artist, the artist as an arbiter of values, of taste, of social and political life, has not changed. We still need to think of ourselves as making personal, radical gestures. But the tradition which specified that this was to be found in the untrammelled exercise of the sensibility is, or soon will be, moribund. If landscape painting is to continue not as a sentimental attachment to ideas and practices of the recent past but as 'painting' full-fledged, the romantic personality notwithstanding, some basic changes in attitude must occur. To begin with, the artist can remove himself one step back from the painting and paint so that the picture is legible as a world which has its own logic and in which his presence is not inescapable, a world which presents a challenge to that which we commonly hold to be around us. This requires a restudying of the earlier practices of landscape painting, conventions of perspective and atmosphere, color and light, volume and detail, all of which must not only be relearned but reformed by each artist. Within this framework distortions of the forms based on invented geometric and spatial systems, analysis of the inferred structure of objects, color seen as light of a particular character, will appear as part of the world rather than as the artist's arbitrary statement. The paintings which result from this might be connected with metaphysical painting or surrealism, but they will carry meaning as the kernel of landscape painting, not in the sensibility towards abstraction."



Laderman does not see the 18th and 19th centuries through antiquarian eyes but instead views them as part, the major part to date, of an epoch within which the contemporary artist lives. He has stated the difference between the 19th and 20th centuries in terms of landscape, although again it can be applied to other forms of figurative painting: "Although they are direct descendants of the 19th-century landscape painters, their work is different almost in kind, in that in the 19th century it was still possible to say of a painting, 'this is what nature is like,' whereas in the new artists' work it is always evident that nature is not really being called into question; we are experiencing the artist's nature."

The paintings of William Bailey, Arthur Elias, Maxwell Hendler, Richard Joseph, Sidney Tillim, Paul Wiesenfeld and Donald Wynn share a number of qualities which have less to do with an interconnected look than with a commonly held set of attitudes about painting. Perhaps Elias summed up one aspect negatively when he wrote, "the sixties exposed everything to the surface. No secrets, no mysteries, romance or inner struggle. The artist became impersonal, tongue-in-cheek, machine-like." The exasperation of the statement is not necessarily shared by each of the artists mentioned above, yet in talk or correspondence with these artists there seems to exist an alienation from the present moment which has as much to do with the art world as it has to do with art. The peculiar dynamism of this world was written about by Morse Peckham:

"Why do people make value statements about works of art? The answer is a triviality; they do so because they make value statements about everything else."<sup>2</sup> In the following paragraph he adds, "But since value statements cannot be derived from works of art, but only applied to them, they are derived from other and extra-artistic sources, morality, philosophy, various sciences. Consequently they reflect the instability of such areas at the high innovative level. Nothing, not even women's clothes, is so unstable as fashions in value judgments at this high cultural level. The result is that if one takes fashionable valuations seriously, vast areas of art are made inaccessible. Artistic valuations are the greatest hindrance imaginable to the adequate response to a work of art, particularly if it is out of fashion; and if it is in fashion, valuations can limit the perception of what can be responded to, since like all statements they are prescriptive statements, behavior-controlling models. They are in fact truly useful only as a means of discovering and focusing on what they do *not* select for positive valuation."

Perhaps Peckham is overly fond of the word *fashion* as applied to current serious art criticism, but nonetheless his tracing of the side effects of much current criticism is particularly apt at this moment, especially in relation to figurative painting. American vanguard art has discovered its own set of heroes, myths, forebears and at present (via criticism) seems intent on future possibilities. In the push and pull to establish itself, this same vanguard has had to flatten a lot of nonbelievers and those flattened hardest were traditional figurative artists.



The provocative problem of how to arrive at a wholeness, an understanding of subject matter, of nature, of the external world, is a key to understanding the uses of the photograph as subject matter in the paintings of Robert Bechtle, Harold Bruder, John Clem Clarke, Chuck Close, Richard Estes, Audrey Flack, Howard Kanovitz, Richard McLean, Malcolm Morley and Paul Staiger. Let us assume, as I believe, that the photograph became a tool for the artist's perception as it did decades ago for painters and illustrators. The complexity of modern urban visual phenomena does not lend itself to the self-absorbed contemplation of an artist before his subject with pencil and paper. The camera is a useful tool in recording visual phenomena under trying circumstances. Matthew Brady's Civil War pictures recorded the enormity of modern warfare at a time when the conceptualizing of painters could not cope with the diversity of mass scale as quickly or as succinctly as could even the cumbersome, large view cameras of the 19th century. The large camera in the hands of an artist like Brady was used in as painterly a manner as he could muster for his whole mode of seeing was nurtured by painting because of the absence in the 1860's of a tradition of a camera vision or viewpoint. What seems to be at issue today once again, as it was for Degas and Cassatt, is the peculiar nature of the *grabbed* photograph, the snapshot, which breaks all canons of 19th-century taste and has divided critics, aestheticians and art historians for decades. Photographers themselves continue to debate the intrinsic merits of the large view camera and the handheld 35 mm. camera. The snapshot aesthetic permeates the work of the photo-realists, boosted as it was by the pop aesthetic of this past decade, just as surely as the wholly-composed view camera aesthetic dovetails with the painterly concerns of the traditional artists included in this exhibition.

The snapshot vision of Chuck Close breaks down the middle-distance aesthetic by shoving the subject into the center foreground of the picture plane. Extreme frontality, giganticism and intense exploitation of the frozen moment (the latter being gained only with a snapshot technique) eliminated psychological distance. It is not without reason that Close refers to his painting method as "information." Close's remorseless exploitation of his subject's features leaves them exposed in a way whose only parallel is the cinematic close-up.

Malcolm Morley's sensibility seems to have been nourished by the very special type of photograph published by the *Illustrated London News*, or the numerous photo booklets which were and are designed to attract the English city-dweller to beach resort towns in England, Scotland and Wales. The attraction of the picturesque, along with the attraction of the architectural ruin and the antique fragment, is very much a part of Morley's nostalgia for particular aspects of the past. As divergent as Morley's concerns are from those of Laderman, it is precisely at this point where a confluence exists. Morley's working methods are seemingly quite detached from the implications of his primary subject, the particular photo, postcard or reproduction of depicted people, places or earlier works of art. I believe this apparent detachment to be untrue and that in fact Morley is quite faithful to his subjects in terms which are dictated by the photo sources themselves and not the subjects from which they stem. The problem of seeing Morley's paintings correctly is inextricably linked with knowing whence they come. Of course, hints such as white borders, or borders of some sort are given as a clue to format origins. What occurs in Morley's paintings is a visual sleight of hand aggressively defining its own intrinsic energy. All the while he puns on the realness of photo origins, in opposition to realness of the perceiver's power to recall a particular picture or recoup a memory of an analagous scene. Few sophisticated viewers are fooled by the fact that Morley's paintings stem from media sources, but upon continued looking many are hard put to say from where within the media his paintings come. Morley accomplishes



this feat by matching or heightening printed dye color with plastic paint, flattening or telescoping space and sometimes, within the same painting, subtly shifting to a full painterly illusion harking back to the sources of the photo rather than the photo itself.

Like Morley, Kanovitz attempts a full illusionism stemming from the intimate or grabbed photograph. Kanovitz uses the photo-journalist technique of recreating a situation in terms of frozen moments. Kanovitz's figures spontaneously pose and gesticulate, reminding the onlooker of photo sources. Unlike most of the artists in this exhibition Kanovitz has rendered the environments in which his subjects act in a summary manner. It was therefore quite natural for him to literally detach his subjects from their backgrounds and simply provide them an existence within the space usually reserved for us. The force of his decision becomes apparent when one enters a gallery space and is confronted with *The People*, which plants itself firmly as painted object and in turn shifts from simulacra to reality with ease.

John Clem Clarke translates the colored slide into a finished painting by a series of steps which includes: (1) the projection of the slide, (2) the cutting of numerous stencils after the slide has been projected and a decision has been made to use it as subject matter, (3) the placing of the canvas on the floor with the preliminary stencil laid in place upon it, and (4) the spraying through the loose stencil with the aid of an inexpensive hand spray gun filled with oil paint. Succeeding stencils or templates delineate the areas of particular color and tonal changes within the composition in question.

The final sprayed color, delineated by the edges of each template, functions in three ways. It brings forth the intrinsic character of the particular colored slide, while reminding the viewer of the original scene and at the same time embodying the artist's notion of what a specific color portion looks like relative to adjacent color areas. Upon close examination section by section, template-demarked contours, which are seemingly too quickly and crisply contrasted, are made harmonious in the process of final color overlays. In those pictures which fail the failure is usually due to a breaking down of clear dark-to-light or tonal delineations within the composition in question. Thus, the colored slide, whether or not it is under or overexposed or relatively accurate vis-à-vis the subject, functions as a tonal guide in the painting of the pictures rather than as a stringent color cue.

Although irony is certainly intended in Clarke's figure compositions, it functions in a less determined fashion than in his earlier paintings, which took off from historical models as painted by 18th- and 19th-century artists. The newer pictures are not necessarily more complex for Clarke since he must make more decisions in setting up models in chosen environments than he did in simply remaking, for example, Trumbull's *Battle of Bunker Hill*. For whatever myriad reasons, the new work, wherein Clarke has posed and photographed models in accord with historical themes and painted from the resultant colored slides, are richer paintings than are earlier examples. It is as if Clarke, in selecting and posing contemporary models to fill out a chosen, (usually) mythological, subject rather than relying directly on past paintings, achieves a monumentality closer in spirit to the 18th- and 19th-century painters than was possible in his earlier reformulations of particular pictures.



Richard Estes differs considerably from those artists who, like John Clem Clarke, explore the possibilities of the color slide, and those who, like Paul Wiesenfeld and Philip Pearlstein, plant themselves in front of their subjects and paint directly. Estes uses the colored slide as something more than an *aide memoire* and something less than a subject in and for itself. For example, within an as yet untitled painting of a hot dog stand situated on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Estes found his slide of the subject too fragmentary to be of use in completing the right side of the composition. To remedy the situation Estes simply invented an aluminum and glass exterior which was in character with the rest of the sign and reflection-laden exterior of the building. As Estes has said, "I use the colored slide as a sketch or drawing."

Like the majority of pre-Barbizon and pre-Impressionist landscape painters, Estes begins and finishes his paintings in his studio. He does not square up his canvas from the slide, but instead begins a loose drawing with paint in rather neutral color which ends in a complete tonal representation of the subject. The preliminary looseness was surprising. Estes remarked about it, "Beginning loose and tightening as I go along is really much faster than attempting to achieve a preliminary hard pencil rendering." He added somewhat later that the only answer to the question of working without slides would be to equip a studio inside a covered truck which includes one way glass panelling on its cab sides. The rig would enable him to paint from the subject on the street, in seclusion and without distraction.

The paintings in this exhibition by Alfred Leslie, Philip Pearlstein and Sidney Tillim are of particular significance within the context of what has been called the new figurative painting. Each of these artists, while developing his own art to suit personal inner needs, is also struggling with the core problems inherent in the reassertion of a non-photo oriented figurative painting. Along with Gabriel Laderman and William Bailey the successes and failures of their respective oeuvres have come to symbolize in some degree the successes and failures of a movement. Whether this attitude is justifiable is not the issue since it is enough at this writing to point to its existence.

There is about each of these artists' works a particular candor, graphically revealed in the way each poses and paints the figure. In Leslie's case it is inherent in the extreme frontality of pose in, for example, *Constance West*. It is remorseless when he exhibits a grisaille self-portrait, hands in pockets, dressed in painting clothes. Leslie exhibited, what now is seen to be an obvious stage in his development, a painting which reasserts grand manner portraiture without a royal, much less a middle-class, sitter. It is as if Leslie is telling us that style can and in fact should be wrenched from preconceived notions about what it served in the past. As imposing and ambitious as his figure painting has been from 1966 to date, he acknowledges in each subsequent picture that he is approaching something which will be developed subsequently; he does not, like the academicians of the 19th century, present the viewer with 'finished machines' as their ultimate achievements.

Philip Pearlstein's figure groupings, on the other hand, seem in some senses serial, and in others complete as single entities. Like Laderman, Pearlstein seems to posit a unified viewpoint which comes together in the act of painting coherently unified subject matter. He is a unique artist in many respects, but I believe his finest achievement to be the way in which he treats the figure as a dense volume in space. The painted figure is seen as a real analog to the posed model in spite of nonlocal



color, overly determined foreshortening and cropping of figures. Pearlstein intently pursues the limb-to-limb relationships of the posed body in relationship to itself, the adjacent figure, the studio props, and finally, the studio itself.

Sidney Tillim's paintings have little evidence of the extreme plasticity to be found in either Bailey, Laderman, Leslie or Pearlstein's pictures. Early paintings which presented the viewer with details of studio environments or children shooting marbles, such as *Champion*, 1966, have been particularly influential for younger figurative artists in that they provided much-needed approaches toward handling subject matter as well as a particular focus on compositional devices within which the subjects could be exploited. Tillim's larger and more recent figure paintings are at once more ambitious and more problematic. The problematic aspects of these compositions have to do with the fitting together of numerous psychologically separate figures within a single composition. The viewer must confront each figure separately instead of, as in *Champion*, seeing the interactivity of the figures, their endeavor and their positioning within a tightly composed space. Tillim's latest large figure composition, *The Death of a Girl (Memorial to Kate Housekeeper)*, overcomes the separateness or vignette effect produced by the disengagement of the figures by his earlier compositional device wherein the model's activities have been controlled and thus draws the viewer's attention to the wholeness of the composition rather than to its component parts.

<sup>1</sup>"Unconventional Realists," *Artforum*, vol. 7, November 1967, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>*Man's Rage for Chaos*, p. 311.